

THE BANNOCK INDIAN TRAIL



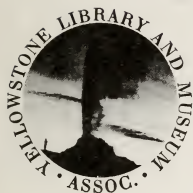
BY AUBREY L. HAINES

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THE HOMELAND AND NEIGHBORS OF THE BANNOCK INDIANS

The Bannock Indian Trail



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The Bannock Indian Trail*

by

AUBREY L. HAINES

The Bannock, or Great Trail of the Indians, as it was sometimes called, was a rough route which began at the Camas Meadows in Idaho, crossed Targhee Pass into the Madison River Valley, then climbed over the southern end of the Gallatin Range into the drainage of the Gardner River. From there it passed eastward up the Yellowstone and Lamar rivers to the Absaroka Mountains, which were crossed by passes opening upon the Clark Fork and Shoshone rivers and the buffalo plains along their lower reaches. With due allowance for the rugged terrain, the route was about 200 miles in length.

As an Indian thoroughfare across the Rocky Mountains, the Bannock Trail served for a mere forty years, and the events which brought it into being, as well as those which ended its usefulness, are a part of the history of the tribe for whom it is named.¹ They were the Bannocks of the Snake River Plains — nomads, with a characteristic Plains culture when white men first met them. They owned horses, lived in skin tipis and subsisted on buffalo, which were taken in great communal hunts. They were also athletic and warlike, endlessly at odds with their neighbors to the north, the Blackfoot; occasionally feuding over horses with the Flathead to the northwest and the Nez Perce to the west, but generally managing to maintain an uneasy truce with those tribes. With the Utes to the south of them, enmity was the rule, and, with the Crows to the east, it was sometimes war and sometimes peace.² Only with the Shoshoni, who shared the Snake River Plain with them, and with their near relatives the northern Paiutes, were they really on good terms.³ So it was, also, in their relationship to the whites—by some they were considered honest and friendly, and by others, thievish and murderous.⁴

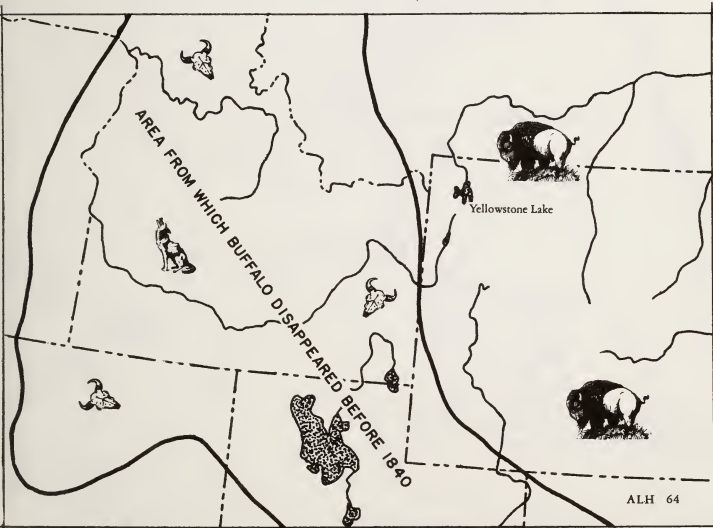
Until near the end of the fur trade era, the Bannock economy was solidly based on communal hunting of buffalo on the Snake River Plains and in the adjacent mountains. Occasional excursions took them afar, during periods of buffalo scarcity, but there was no regular pattern to the hunting migrations while their needs could be satisfied west of the continental divide—that is, until about 1841. Mountain man Osborne Russell speaking of the country along the Portneuf River in 1841, says:

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"In the year 1836 large bands of buffalo could be seen in almost every little valley on the small branches of this stream; at this time the only traces which could be seen of them were the scattered bones of those that had been killed. Their trails which had been made in former years, deeply indented in the earth, were overgrown with grass and weeds. The trappers often remarked to each other as they rode over these lonely plains that it was time for the white man to leave the mountains as beaver and game had nearly disappeared."⁵

The white man could leave the Snake River country but the Indian could not, for it was his homeland.

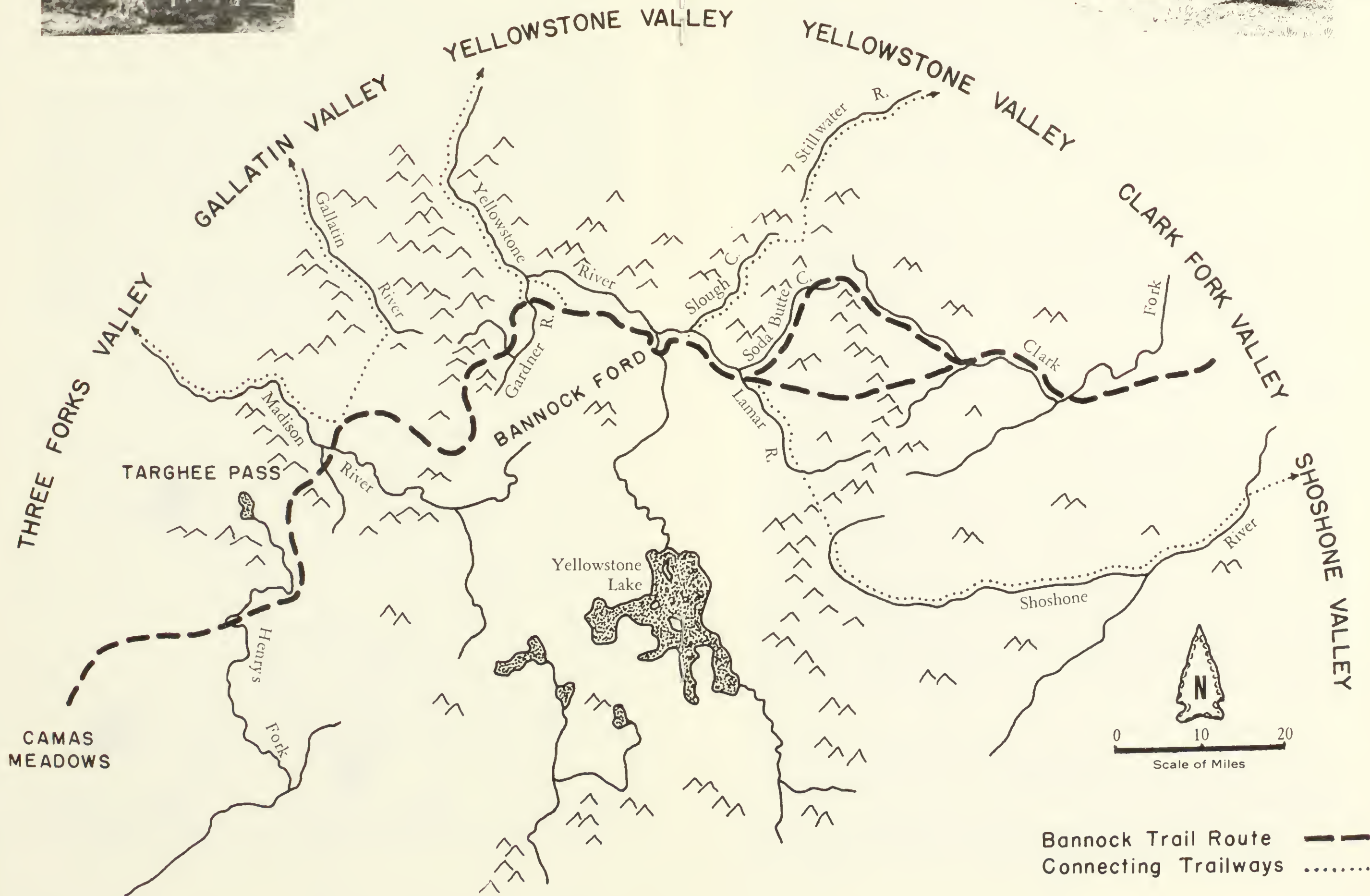
Bereft of their accustomed livelihood by the elimination of the western buffalo herds (a work in which the Indian shared honors with the white trapper), the Bannocks were faced with the harsh alternatives of adopting the ways of some of their poorer Shoshoni friends or "going to buffalo" for their necessities. The latter was their choice, for they preferred buffalo beef, leather clothing and warm robes, with a comfortable skin tipi for shelter, to existence at the brush wickiup level. That meant a difficult annual hunting migration to the eastern buffalo ranges, yet it was a decision which came easily to a people whose previous nomadic life had familiarized them with the routes of travel and inured them to the hardships of the trail. By combining with neighbors who were similarly inclined, such a trek could be made with reasonable security.⁶





THE BANNOCK INDIAN TRAIL

AND THE HUNTING AREAS ACCESSIBLE FROM IT



There is no reason to doubt that the Bannocks were familiar with a system of ancient trailways which were known and used by many tribes. There were four routes open to them by which they could reach buffalo ranges: northward, to the valley of the Missouri River beyond Three Forks was the short, easy way, but it lay within the country of their implacable enemies, the Blackfoot. Southeast-erly, by way of Bear River to the Green River Valley was a longer route which was also easy to travel, but it led to an area which was already poor hunting. Eastward, via the Teton Pass and the Gros Ventre Valley to the plains of Wind River was a rough trail which would bring them into the very heartland of the Crows, with excellent possibilities for armed collisions. The remaining route lay across the Yellowstone Plateau, and, while rugged traveling for horse-drawn travois in some places, it had the outstanding advantage of passing through "neutral" country,⁷ and it provided easy access to several widely separated buffalo ranges.

It should be emphasized here that the Bannocks were not the only users of the great trail which was developed to reach the eastern buffalo lands; for Brigham Madsen says that the fall hunting trips, which became an annual event after 1840, were made by ". . . Bannock and Fort Hall Shoshoni, either alone or with Nez Perce, and sometimes in company with Flathead, Lemhi, or Wyoming Shoshoni. . . ."⁸

That portion of the Bannock Trail which lay across what is now Yellowstone Park can yet be traced on the ground almost throughout, and it will give a better idea of the nature of the route to trace it in detail." From the point near Horse Butte in the Madison Valley, where the main trail from the Camas Prairie, via Targhee Pass, was joined by branches up the Madison and Gallatin Rivers, the trail entered what is now the Park by way of the Duck Creek drainage, approximately ten miles north of West Yellowstone, Montana. It then followed the edge of the valley in a southward swinging arc almost to Cougar Creek, before doubling abruptly northward to pass over the Gallatin Range west of Mount Holmes, at an elevation of 9,300 feet (2,750 feet of climb from Horse Butte). Once over the top, the trail followed down Indian Creek to its junction with the Gardner River, where there was a branching; the main trail crossing Swan Lake Flat and descending through Snow Pass to the vicinity of the present Park headquarters at Mammoth, while a cut-off passed between the Gardner River and Bunsen Peak to rejoin the main trail below the present high bridge over the Gardner.

At Mammoth, near where the hydro-electric powerhouse now stands, the main trail was joined by an Indian trail ascending the Gardner River from the Yellowstone¹⁰ (an exit which gave access to the buffalo range in the valley between Yankee Jim Canyon and Livingston, Montana.)

Southeast of Mammoth, the trail crossed the Gardner River and ascended the east bank of Lava Creek to the vicinity of the

present campground, then crossed Blacktail Deer Creek, where it was joined by two minor Indian trails, one from the mouth of the Gardner¹¹ (later known as the "Turkey Pen Trail"), and one to the ford over the Yellowstone River below the mouth of Oxbow Creek.¹² From the junction on Blacktail Deer Creek, the main trail continued across the high meadows to Crescent Hill, which it rounded on the south side through a narrow ravine later designated as The Cut. Descending steeply to the site of Yancey's ranch, the trail crossed Pleasant Valley to the Yellowstone River, and passed upstream, over the top of Overhanging Cliff to a crossing of Tower Creek at the present automobile campground.

Where the trail crosses Antelope Creek, it is yet plainly visible from the road, and it was there joined by an Indian trail from the Canyon area, via the western flank of Mount Washburn.¹³ Continuing down the Yellowstone River, a crossing was made at the ford near what are now called the "Sulphur Beds".

Once over the river, the trail climbed out of the canyon to enter the Lamar Valley through the "Horseshoe". From there the route held close to the foot of Specimen Ridge and Amethyst Mountain, branching off another minor Indian trail to the Stillwater and Rosebud Rivers by way of Slough Creek.¹⁴ At the mouth of Soda Butte Creek, the main trail itself branched; one fork passing to the Clark Fork River by way of Soda Butte Creek, and the other reaching that river more directly by following up the divide between Cache and Calfee Creeks. An Indian trail from the Upper Lamar and Shoshone rivers joined the route at the mouth of Cache Creek.¹⁵

While the route just described is plainly visible at many points in the Park, it is most evident in the Blacktail Deer Creek meadows, where there are often several parallel travois tracks, and in the Tower Fall area, where traffic was forced into a single track by the roughness of the terrain. Essentially, the Bannock Trail was a system of trailways, which, together, made up a complex route.

It is not possible to give exact dates for the beginning and ending of Indian use of the Bannock Trail, but it seems most probable that it spanned only the years from 1838 to 1878. Yet that very brief period had three distinct phases: First, from 1838 to 1862, golden years during which the Bannocks and their neighbors were relatively unhampered, subject to no treaties, not yet beaten down by war with the white man, nor seriously encroached upon by his settlements. Also, the Yellowstone National Park was not in existence and there were no white occupants to hamper the movement of migrating Indians.

The second phase, from 1862 to 1868, was a time of intended transition from the old, free life to a settled reservation existence. After the Battle of Bear River, at which a large group of the Shoshoni, accompanied by a few Bannocks, were badly defeated, General Patrick E. Connor began treaty negotiations which finally

resulted in the establishment of the Fort Hall Reservation. During those years, the Indians continued to use the Bannock Trail route in their annual hunting migrations, but development of the Cooke City mines finally forced them to pass over the Absaroka Mountains by the more rugged southern branch of the trail. Toward the end the Bannocks were smarting from accumulating grievances.

The third, and final phase, is the time from 1868 to the Bannock War of 1878. In August of 1869, Chief Taghee told Agent Danilson, at Fort Hall, that he hoped the hunt they were then starting would be the last trek to the buffalo plains, for the old chief wanted his people to settle on the reservation and become farmers.¹⁶ But it was soon apparent that reservation life held nothing but starvation for them, so the self-reliant Bannocks continued their annual hunting migrations, with or without approval, sometimes going by one of the southern routes to Wind River in the hope of sharing in the distribution of annuities there.

The troubles of the Bannocks accumulated rapidly during those final years: Chief Taghee died on the buffalo plains during the winter of 1870-71, and his place was not adequately filled.¹⁷ Conflicts developed in which the Bannocks and Shoshoni chastised the Arapaho, but were themselves driven entirely out of the Yellowstone country by the Sioux one year, so they returned with jaded ponies, few robes and in great want. Then there were skirmishes with the Nez Perce and the Crows, and, inevitably an involvement with the whites.¹⁸ The result was increasing pressure upon the Indian agent and the military to confine the Bannocks to their reservation. Finally, horses and guns were seized, convincing many of the desperate Indians that war was their only arbiter.

The last Bannocks to use the trail may have been the ones defeated on September 4, 1878, at Heart Mountain, by troops under Colonel Nelson A. Miles. They were the same Indians who had fired upon A. D. Wilson's party of United States Geological Survey men at Henrys Lake,¹⁹ creating consternation all out of proportion to their numbers.

In conclusion, it should be remembered that this trail had a considerable influence on the opening of the northern part of Yellowstone Park. From the mouth of the Gardner River to Cooke City, it provided the initial access, and, when a road was built from Mammoth Hot Springs to that mining town, it followed the Bannock Trail closely all the way. But for the Indian, all it accomplished was to delay somewhat the ending of his free and colorful way of life.

NOTES

- 1 Brigham D. Madsen, *The Bannock of Idaho*, Caxton Printers (1958), p. 21.
- 2 *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.
- 3 Ake Hultkrantz, "The Shoshones of the Rocky Mountain Area", in *Annals of Wyoming*, 33:1 (1961), p. 28.
- 4 Madsen, *op. cit.*, p. 59 ff.
- 5 Osborne Russell, *Journal of a Trapper*, ed. by A. L. Haines, Oregon Historical Society (1955), p. 123.
- 6 Madsen, *op. cit.*, p. 22.
- 7 The resident Indians of the Yellowstone Plateau were *Tukurikas*, or "Sheepeaters", a mixture of Shoshoni walkers and Bannock mountain dwellers, according to Hultkrantz, *op. cit.*, p. 34.
- 8 Madsen, *op. cit.*, p. 21.
- 9 The route described is essentially that worked out by Wayne F. Replogle, in his booklet, *Yellowstone's Bannock Indian Trails*, Yellowstone Library and Museum Association (1956).
- 10 As the Washburn-Langford-Doane party approached the mouth of the Gardner River, in 1870, Langford noted, "Along our trail today are plenty of Indian 'sign', and marks of the lodge poles dragging in the sand on either side of the trail." N. P. Langford, *Diary of the Washburn Expedition to the Yellowstone and Firehole Rivers in the Year 1870*, F. J. Haynes, Publisher (1905), p. 14.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- 12 Ms. field notes of the survey of the "Northern Boundary Wyoming Territory, 1879". See entries for the 25th mile.
- 13 See the map accompanying the "Report Upon the Yellowstone National Park, to the Secretary of the Interior", by P. W. Norris, Government Printing Office (1879).
- 14 See the map of Yellowstone National Park prepared by A. D. Wilson and Henry Gannett (1878).
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 Madsen, *op. cit.*, p. 173.
- 17 *Ibid.*, pp. 176-80.
- 18 *Ibid.*, pp. 180-81, 183, 185.
- 19 George F. Brimlow, *The Bannock Indian War of 1878*, The Caxton Printers (1938), pp. 180, 182-84.

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